

THE TEXAS LONGHORN

Preservation of a Vanishing Breed



Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, Oklahoma

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The history and romance of the cowboy and the Texas longhorn have gripped the imaginations of not only Americans but people all over the world. You may already know that the rangy, raw-boned, long-legged, long-horned cattle wandering about the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge are the same breed as those driven by cowboys on isolated and dangerous trails to railroads after the Civil War. What you may not know, however, is that the Texas longhorn was nearly extinct by 1922. The huge herds didn't vanish as the buffalo did, in an astounding slaughter, but were almost bred away. The preservation of this breed is another Wichita Mountains environmental success story.

The longhorn descended from at least three types of cattle, some arriving in America as early as 1521. From the Spanish "Black cattle," whose bulls were bred for the bull ring, the longhorn acquired its stamina, fierceness, keen senses, and stag-like muscles. From the Mexican "common cattle," it acquired its broad and heavy horns and some of its variety of colors. Finally, a few of the Texas settlers' domestic cattle mixed with the wild herds, adding even more color possibilities. As the 19th century advanced and these cattle intermingled, horns grew longer, bodies heavier and rangier, and colors unlimited. The "Texas longhorn" became a unique and distinct breed of cattle.

After the Texas Revolution (1836), the Mexicans in South Texas abandoned their ranches and much of their stock. Between the Texas Revolution and the Civil War, cattle grew wild in Texas and multiplied at a rapid and constant rate. Sporadic attempts were made to gather and market these cattle, but since the demand for cattle was low, they had little more value than any other wild animal of the plains. During the Civil War, with potential markets blockaded and men fighting, cattle multiplied undisturbed. By the close of the war, more than 3½ million unbranded wild cattle roamed the plains.

Not until after the Civil War were conditions economically right for the cattle industry. With longhorn cattle seemingly unlimited, manpower plentiful, beef in demand, and a railroad for transporting it, all that remained was to get the cattle to the

railroad. And the same qualities that allowed the longhorns to survive in the wild made it possible, although admittedly dangerous, to trail them to the railhead. With their stout hooves, long legs, stag-like muscles, thick skins, and powerful horns, they could walk the roughest ground, cross the hottest deserts, climb the highest mountains, swim the wildest streams, fight off the fiercest bands of wolves, or endure hunger, cold, thirst, and punishment as few beasts — wild or domestic — ever could.

As the railroad moved closer and the range was fenced, however, those characteristics that enabled the longhorn to survive on the trail were no longer at a premium. The pure longhorn, then, began to disappear and nearly became extinct.

It became apparent that only prompt action could save the longhorn from extinction. Wichita Mountains was authorized to assemble the first government cattle herd. Will Barnes and John Hatton, armed with a description of the longhorn "type," set forth on a 5,000-mile search for typical longhorns. After inspecting more than 30,000 head of Texas cattle, a herd of 20 cows, 3 bulls, 3 steers, and 4 calves arrived at Wichita Mountains in August of 1927. From this first government herd came the foundation stock for one other refuge herd and small private herds. Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge today maintains a herd of 300 animals. Surplus cattle are rounded up by horses and riders for auction each September.

Today's Wichita herd demonstrates how the pure-bred longhorn might have developed without interbreeding. If you begin to imagine yourself rounding up these cattle for your own trail drive, you maintain a healthy respect for them. While they will generally move off as a human approaches, the slightest provocation may convert them to aggressive and dangerous individuals. In fact, their ferocious disposition caused one early observer to note that they were "50 times more dangerous to footmen than the fiercest buffalo."